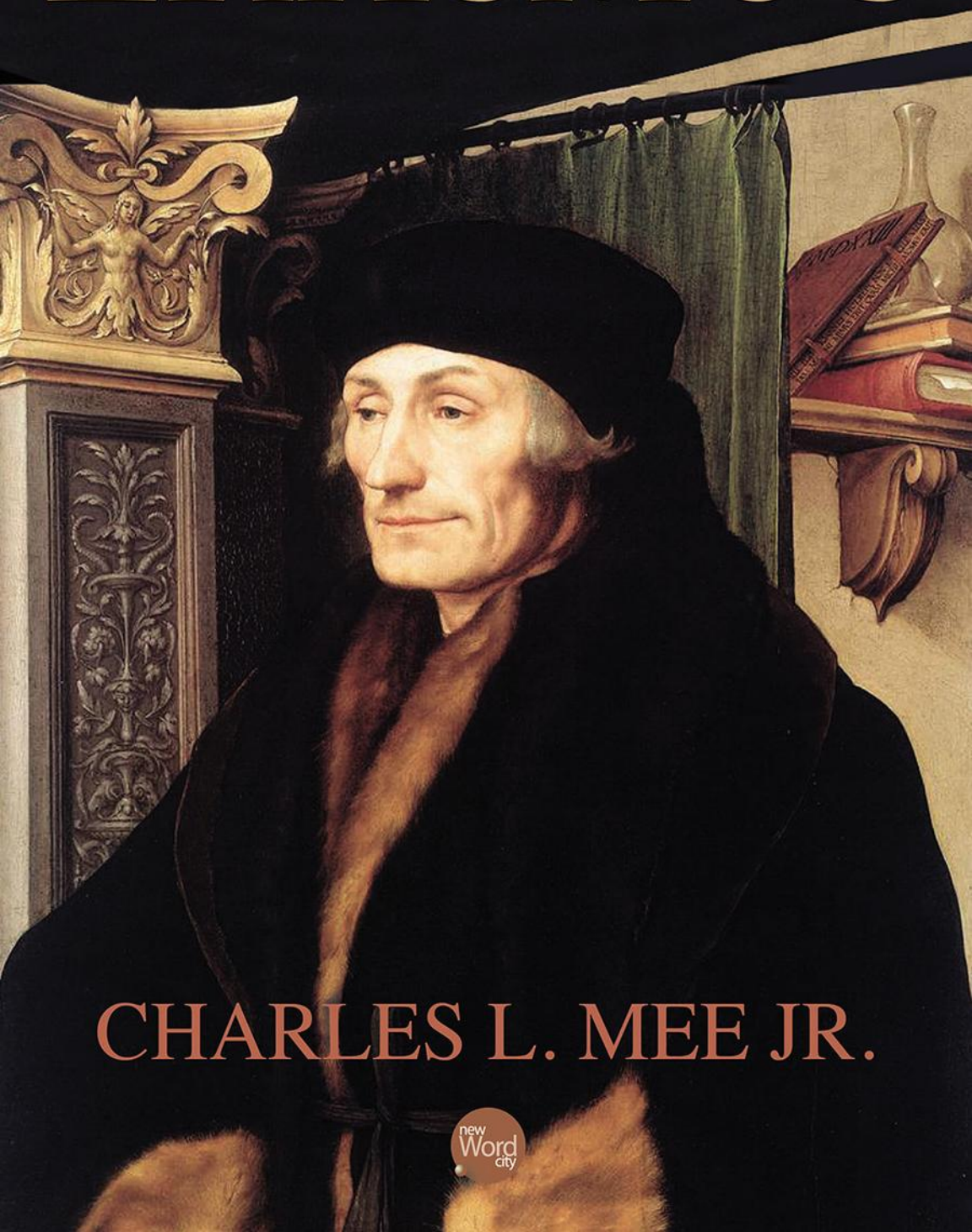


# ERASMUS



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# I

## BIRTH AND REBIRTH

The Renaissance in Europe brought enormous change to the world. It began in Italy in the 1300s with such heralds as Petrarch's sonnets, Coluccio Salutati's linking of Jesus and Socrates, and Leonardo Bruni's praise of Roman ethics. Gathering force in Padua, Ferrara, Florence, and other Italian city-states during the 1400s, it moved like a whirlwind up into Europe, through France and Germany, and spent itself in a last burst in the age of Shakespeare in England of the early 1600s. It began as a revival, a "rebirth" of the arts and letters of ancient Greece and Rome. After the era of feudalism that followed the fall of Rome, the men of the Renaissance believed they could do no better than bring alive again the brilliant days of antiquity. But what began as a revival of the old ended, in fact, as nothing less than the birth of the modern age.

The Renaissance began with scholars uncovering ancient poems and scientific treatises, the dialogues of Plato, the letters of Cicero, the poetry of Virgil, the works of Ovid and Horace and Tacitus and Terence. And the discoveries of scholars ushered in a complete transformation of the world. In politics, the old feudal estates were broken up, and the idea of nationalism swept through Europe. In economics, capitalism was born. Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope to India; Christopher Columbus discovered the New World; Copernicus proved that the earth was not at the center of the universe but revolved about the sun. Universities were founded; printing was invented and sent scores and hundreds of books through the Continent. In the arts, such men as Giotto, Masaccio, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci turned the flat surfaces of walls and canvases into "picture windows" that showed men boldly in command of a lively world of new dimensions. Novel ideas of human freedom and human dignity intoxicated men. The change brought both excitement and fear and anxiety; wars raged throughout Europe, among the city-states in Italy, between Italians and Spaniards, French and Italians, the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy. However we define the Renaissance - as a movement of the arts or of religion or of philosophy, whether we say it began earlier than the 1300s or endured beyond the time of Shakespeare - of this circumstance we can be certain: The tumult moved through Europe with the force of a hurricane and left little of life untouched in its passing.

The calm eye amid this extraordinary hurricane was Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, a small man with a large nose, whose stomach gave him terrible trouble. He was a frail, sickly boy, and he grew to be an ill, irritable old man. He was a bookworm, but a poor student. He was boastful; he was coolly distant; at times he was sarcastic; he was pedantic; and he could even be dogmatic. Above all, he was ambiguous, uncertain, a man whose own writing is liberally sprinkled with probablys and perhapses.

We like our heroes to be men of action with strong convictions, willing to fight and die for them - and there were plenty of such men during the Renaissance, men who were burned at the stake, men who hired themselves out as *condottieri*, leaders of mercenary soldiers who fought in wars only to gain fame. History is generally made up of such men - conquerors, revolutionaries, fantastic villains, and saintly martyrs. But the whirlwind of great events and mad wars becomes suddenly calm around Erasmus. History stops, is suspended for a moment, and is very profoundly affected by this man of calm reason - for Erasmus was the conscience of Europe.

The conscience of Europe, as it turned out, was a habitual liar. He never lied about his beliefs concerning religion or politics or those matters that he thought were of real concern to the world. But he lied about himself from birth to death. The ambiguity of Erasmus begins with his birth: "Born at Rotterdam on the vigil of Simon and Jude [October 27] [he wrote]. . . . Mother was called Margaret, daughter of a physician named Peter. . . . Father was named Gerard; he had secret intercourse with Margaret in anticipation of marriage; some say that words of betrothal had passed between them. This affair gave great offence to the parents and brothers of Gerard. . . . Gerard . . . took a desperate course; he secretly left the country . . . [and] betook himself to Rome. . . . He was well versed in Latin and Greek. . . . When his parents were informed that he was in Rome, they wrote to him that the young woman whom he had wished to marry was dead. He, taking this to be true, was so grieved that he became a priest and applied his whole mind to religion. When he returned home, he found out the deception; but she never afterwards had any wish to marry, nor did he ever touch her again."

All this explanation would make it seem that Erasmus's father became a priest after Erasmus was born and that the affair between his father and mother was short-lived - with the intention of marriage already in their minds. Alas, the story will not hold up. Erasmus had a brother named Peter who was three years older than he was; evidently, his parents had lived together for years, and it would seem that his father was a priest all that time. Later on, Erasmus would say that he was born in 1469 - or then again in 1466 - and we have no way of knowing which was the correct year. It may be that he was born in 1469, but gradually usurped the birthdate of his older brother, in order to make it appear that his parents had not been living together all those years.

Of all the troubles Erasmus had in his life, none was more painful to him than the thought that he was a bastard. We can well imagine that the village gossips whispered constantly about the priest and the woman he kept and the two illegitimate children. There were illegitimate children all over Europe, popes and kings among them, but Erasmus considered it no less a stigma, and the hurt of it dogged him all his life. The very depth of it must convince us that the humiliation was felt from earliest childhood; the wounds of adulthood do not strike so deeply or last so long.

Erasmus found the world so utterly painful, in fact, that in many ways he could not bear to reach out to it. In all his vast amount of writing, we hear nothing of the look of the towns and countrysides he passed through except for two small references. We hear nothing of music. Although he knew the astonishingly gifted painters Holbein and Dürer, he wrote nothing about their art. He knew nothing about science, and as for the discoveries of new continents and new routes to India, he feared that the expansion of the world would only make government more difficult. "I devote myself to my friends," Erasmus wrote.

". . . With them I shut myself in a corner, where I escape the windy crowd and either speak to them in sweet whispers or listen to their gentle voices, conversing with them as with myself. Can anything be more comfortable than this? . . . They talk of what you wish, as much as you wish, as long as you wish. They utter no flattery, feign nothing, keep back nothing.